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ABSTRACT

A group of 106 elderly adults in the Chicago, Illinois, area participated in a study undertaken to identify the reading attitudes of older adults or their difficulties in reading. Each was administered the Survey of Elderly Reading Attitudes (SERA) consisting of 75 items designed to elicit attitudes, recognition and comprehension problems, different reading behaviors, and physical and psychological difficulties involved in reading. The results were compiled for groups separated by sex, age, and years of education. The findings revealed that, in general, females read better than males and the younger group read better and had fewer physical and psychological problems with reading than did the older group. The results also indicated that the higher the educational level, the better the reading skills and attitudes of the subjects. There was evidence of widespread recreational reading and survival reading skills for most adults. The results showed that most of the mature adults who filled out the inventory considered themselves good readers. The study suggests that reading contributes more to the educational and recreational accomplishments of the aged who are better educated than to those with less schooling. (Tables of the survey results are attached.) (HTH)

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Reading Attitudes and Problems of the Elderly

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Reading Attitudes & Problems of the Elderly

In the United States the number of people 65 years of age or older is approximately 22 million, yet unfortunately little is known about their reading behavior (Kingston, 1973, 1979; Robinson and Maring, 1976). A phenomenon called "graying of the campus" has been noted since adult education programs have been booming recently throughout the nation. Reports from colleges during the last decade indicate a focus of attention on the educational and recreational needs of the elderly in the realm of higher education (De Carlo, 1974; Ellison, 1975; Stetar, 1974; Warner, 1974; Yarmon, 1980). It is therefore important for sponsors of these programs to have an understanding of the needs and attitudes of the elderly regarding reading.

As the majority of senior citizens have limited education and training in reading it is safe to assume that the elderly had adverse attitudes toward or difficulties in reading. This study was undertaken to identify some of the problems they indicated.

Method

A group of 106 elderly adults (over 50 years of age) in the Chicago area participated in the study. The group consisted of 31 males and 75 females of all socio-economic levels and varying levels of education. Some were working, others retired or semi-retired. Some were homemakers with varying amounts of work experience. Included in the study were retired university faculty and staff, senior citizen group members, friends and neighbors.

Each was administered the Survey of Elderly Reading Attitudes (SERA) (Kingston, 1981). The inventory consisted of 75 items designed to elicit attitudes, recognition and comprehension problems, different reading behaviors and physical and psychological difficulties involved in reading. Each item consisted of a statement that the respondent was to either "Agree" or "Disagree" with it by circling A or D. The percentage of "Agree responses were calculated for the total group and subgroups by age, sex, and educational level.

Results

The results were compiled for groups separated by sex, age, and years of education. In general there was evidence that females read better than males, the younger group read better and had fewer physical and psychological problems with reading than the older group. The better the educational level, the better the reading skills and attitudes. There was evidence of widespread recreational reading and survival reading skills for most adults.

Table 1 shows that of the 106 participants in this study, 93% agreed to the statement, "I can read most advertisements without difficulty." Eighty-eight percent agreed to the statement, "When reading I get a mental picture of things about which I'm reading." These were followed by agreements of 87% for, "After reading a selection I can state the main idea in my own words"; 83% for the item, "I can read the newspaper without difficulty"; again 83% for, "I can recognize most of the words I read the instant I see them"; 82% for, "I have no trouble reading printed directions when I need to"; 81% for, "I can understand the marks in the dictionary which explain

how a word is pronounced"; 76% for, "After I read a passage I can recall most of the important facts and details I have read".

Insert Table 1 about here

As indicated in Table 2, there was a disparity (61%) of responses to the statement, "Reading helps me not to feel lonely", between the age group 50-59 years and the 80 and over age group, with only 27% of the former agreeing and 88% of the latter agreeing.

The next greatest difference was for the item, "I find my attention wanders when I read", with only 18% of the youngest group and 75% of the oldest group agreeing, another large difference (57%). The next item shows that as people grow older they are more likely to regard a day as wasted if they don't read for at least one hour. Although it may seem contradictory, this is followed by the item which indicates that older people read only when they have nothing else to do. Next is the response which indicated that the older people think they are above average readers for their group.

Insert Table 2 about here

Other differences indicate that the oldest group frequently overlook words; more often skip words they don't know; don't like violent and sexy novels as much as the younger groups. The print often blurs for them after 15-20 minutes of reading; they take more time to locate a number in the telephone book; they have difficulty recalling the facts and details; they are

more self-conscious about reading aloud. Their families and friends are less interested in what they read; they are less able to paraphrase the main ideas, they read more than they did when they were younger. The oldest group is also more likely to reread stories they have read before; they are less likely to have a current library card; they have greater difficulty concentrating; they tend to spell out words they don't know; they read the Bible more frequently; they read more widely; they read more slowly; and they have more difficulty reading newspapers and advertisements.

Table 3 is a comparison of responses of 31 males and 74 females where there is a disparity of 10% or more. The greatest difference (32%) is for the item, "I can understand directions for filing tax returns without seeking help", 68% of the males responded "agree" while only 36% of the females responded "agree". This can be related to the image portrayed by the media and advertisements. Other responses indicate that in general:

Males: read fewer books
read less fiction
read slower than when younger
prefer larger type in newspapers
have difficulty reading print on glossy paper
don't get family or friends involved in what they read
don't prefer violent and sexy novels
don't subscribe to many magazines
often don't believe printed material

In contrast, usually:

Females:

read more books

read more fiction

don't read slower than when younger

don't have as much difficulty reading print on glossy paper

get family and friend involved in what they read

prefer violent and sexy novels

subscribe to more magazines

more often believe printed material

Insert Table 3 about here

Table 4 is a comparison of responses by educational level of the participants where there is a disparity of 25% or more.

Insert Table 4 about here

The greatest difference was for the item, "I often find words in the newspapers whose meaning I don't know." This was agreed to by 55% of the less educated, those with 0 - 11 years of educational and only 8% of the most educated group with 16 or more years of education. The next greatest differences were for the following items:

I have a current library card.

I read only when I have nothing else to do.

Most of what is published today is not worth reading.

I am self-conscious about reading aloud.

I generally skip words I don't know while reading.

I can understand directions for filing tax returns without seeking help.

I can read most governmental forms without difficulty.

I frequently overlook words while reading.

I read only when I have nothing better to do.

I try to read all types of material at the same rate of speed.

I know how to use a library card catalog

I subscribe to a daily newspaper

I find my attention wanders when I read.

I frequently miss a line or reread the same line when reading books.

I can understand the marks in a dictionary which explain how a word is pronounced.

I often miss the point of what I've read.

I do not like to read novels that are violent or sexy.

After I read a passage I can recall most of the important facts and details I've read.

It takes me longer than most people to locate a specific name and number in a telephone book.

I spell out words whose meaning I don't know.

I subscribe to two or more magazines.

My friends and family are interested in hearing about what I've read.

I find myself reading stories that I once read but didn't recognize at first.

I go to the public library at least once each month.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that most of the mature adults who filled out the inventory considered themselves good readers. The statements with the highest percentage of agreement were all very positive in nature and indicated no difficulty in reading or understanding a variety of the usual types of materials such as newspapers, advertisements, and directions. When the group was divided into subgroups, however, on the basis of age, sex, and educational levels, it was found that there were some very great differences among these older people.

When the elderly are separated into ten-year age groups, starting at fifty years of age and above, there were twenty-eight items in which the difference between the youngest and the oldest group studied were twenty-five percent or greater. These differences have important implications and offer insight for the teacher, counselor, and administrator. There were larger differences between the age groups than between the sexes or educational levels. The greatest difference between the youngest and oldest group was sixty-one percentage points for the item, "Reading helps me not to feel lonely." It may be that the younger group have more friends, activities and are more likely to have a marriage partner.

The findings for the age groups further indicate that in general, reading skills such as understanding the main idea, remembering the important facts, skimming and scanning, general comprehension, rate and concentration, all diminish with age. Reading also is a means of overcoming lonelineless, and filling idle-time, a form of recreation and relaxation. One may also conclude from these findings that vision and the cognitive processes are also declining for most elderly subjects, also that the main differential in reading habits of the elderly is age followed by educational level, then by sex.

Another finding was that there were twenty-four items with 10% or more differences between male and female responses. It was also apparent that although these differences were important, they were not as great nor as many as the differences between age or education. The greatest difference between males and females was thirty-two percentage points for the item, "I can understand directions for filing tax returns without seeking help", which may reflect an experience factor.

These findings also indicate that females read more than males, especially fictional material and magazines, they appear to be more facile readers. They use the library more frequently and are more knowledgeable about the library and reference material than males. This is in keeping with the literature and may be due partly to the fact that they have spent more time in libraries and reading recreational material than males who generally spend more time in their occupations. An unexpected finding was that females preferred violent or sexy novels more than males.

A final finding was in the differences noted between respondents according to educational levels. It was found that there were twenty-five items with a difference of at least 25 percentage points between highest and lowest educational levels. The greatest difference was forty-seven percentage points, which was for the item, "I often find words in the newspaper whose meaning I don't know."

The findings corroborate what one might expect--that more education contributes to a better vocabulary, better reading habits and improved study skills. It also results in more and better skill in the use of library facilities, broader reading interests and greater reading flexibility. We may conclude that reading contributes more to the educational and recreational accomplishments of the aged who are better educated than to those with less schooling.

Limitations

Possible limitations of this study are that the sample was limited in number and geographical area and that the group was not equally distributed as to sex and age. There were many more females than males and a much larger number of subjects below eighty years of age than above eighty. Another limitation lies in the comprehension of the inventory items by respondents with such a wide variety of educational backgrounds. There were some subjects who had difficulty understanding the instructions and the statements of the items while others found them too simple. The results were also influenced by inventory items left blank.

Hopefully, the results of this study will stimulate further research related to this area so that educators and counselors can better assist the

elderly in their educational and recreational pursuits. Also, so that society can help them avoid, or at least diminish, feelings of loneliness which are so prevalent among the aged.

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Table 1

Highest Percentages of Agree

N = 106

Item		Percentage
6	I can read most advertisements without difficulty.	93
58	When reading I get a mental picture of things about which I'm reading.	88
37	After reading a selection I can state the main idea in my own words.	87
5	I can read the newspaper without difficulty.	83
31	I can recognize most of the words I read the instant I see them.	83
39	I have no trouble reading printed directions when I need to.	82
60	I can understand the marks in the dictionary which explain how a word is pronounced.	81
36	After I read a passage I can recall most of the important facts and details I read.	76

Table 2

Comparison by Age Groups

Item		Percentages 50-59	60-69	70-79	80-89	Diff.
15	Reading helps during loneliness	27	62	81	88	61
4	Attention wanders while reading	18	32	24	75	57
24	Regard day wasted if they don't read for at least 1 hr.	23	29	56	75	52
13	Read only when there's nothing else to do	23	32	29	75	52
42	Recreational reading above average for age group	23	47	49	75	52
32	Frequently overlook words	14	35	32	63	49
61	Skip words they don't know	27	27	27	75	48
16	Don't like violent or sexy novels	41	71	81	88	47
8	Print blurs after 15-20 minutes	5	12	12	50	45
33	Frequently miss or reread a line	18	21	44	63	45
51	Takes above average time to locate telephone number in book	5	15	20	50	45
43	Often miss the point when reading	5	15	17	50	45
36	Can recall most facts and details	91	71	76	50	41
35	Self-conscious about reading aloud	23	35	32	63	40
68	Friends and family interested in material read	64	41	54	25	39
37	Can paraphrase the main idea	100	85	85	63	37
18	Reading has increased	27	41	73	63	36
20	Enjoy rereading stories read before	27	24	49	63	36
21	Reading stories they didn't recognize before	14	27	34	50	36
50	Have a current library card	59	50	37	25	34
47	Have difficulty concentrating while reading	5	21	32	38	33
62	Spell out words they don't know	18	29	37	50	32
71	Read Bible more frequently than when younger	18	21	44	50	32
3	Do not read as widely as before	32	47	39	63	31
1	Read more slowly than before	23	32	49	50	27
66	Read only when there's nothing better to do	23	21	42	50	27
5	Read newspaper without difficulty	100	79	81	75	25
6	Read advertisements without difficulty	100	100	88	75	25

Table 3

Male - Female Differences

N = 31 Male, 74 Female

Item		Percentage		
		Male	Female	Difference
40	Understand directions on tax returns	68	36	32
25	Rarely read books	48	24	24
8	Print blurs after reading 15-20 minutes	29	7	22
23	Would like larger type in newspapers	48	28	20
68	Friends and family interested in what they read	36	55	19
65	Rarely read fiction	39	21	18
16	Don't like to read violent or sexy novels	58	75	17
74	Difficulty reading magazines with glossy paper	39	23	16
1	I read more slowly than I once did	48	33	15
53	Subscribe to two or more magazines	52	67	15
56	Generally believe what I read in books/newspaper	26	41	15
4	Attention wanders while reading	19	33	14
19	Prefer to read Bible and other religious material	29	15	14
57	Try to determine how author wants reader to react	61	47	14
5	Can read a newspaper without difficulty	74	87	13
50	Have a current library card	36	49	13
51	Takes longer than most to locate a number in telephone book	26	13	13
52	Find reading too inactive to con't for long periods	8	21	13
15	Reading helps me not to feel lonely	55	67	12
20	I enjoy rereading stories that I read when younger	45	33	12
29	I often mistake some words for different ones	32	20	12
2	I must reread some material in order to understand	61	72	11
49	I know how to use a library card catalog	61	71	10
60	Can understand dictionary pronounciation marks	74	84	10

Table 4

Comparison by Years of Education

Item		Percentage			
		0-11	12-15	16+	Diff.
30	Often don't know words in newspapers	55	39	8	47
50	Have a current library card	24	47	69	45
13	Read only when nothing else to do	48	37	5	43
38	Say most published material not worth reading	69	43	26	43
35	Self-conscious about reading aloud	59	24	22	37
61	Skip unfamiliar words	45	31	9	36
40	Can understand directions of tax returns	31	43	66	35
7	Can read governmental forms	31	61	65	34
32	Frequently overlook words	52	28	18	34
66	Read only when nothing better to do	41	37	8	33
64	Read all material at same rate	55	39	22	33
49	Know how to use library card catalog	59	61	92	33
27	Subscribe to daily newspaper	51	49	83	32
4	Attention wanders while reading	51	20	26	31
33	Frequently miss or reread a line	48	31	18	30
60	Can understand dictionary pronounciation key	66	84	95	29
43	Often miss the point of material	28	18	0	28
16	Don't read violent or sexy novels	79	73	52	27
36	Can recall facts and details	66	73	92	26
51	Difficulty in locating number in telephone book	31	16	5	26
62	Spell out unfamiliar words	48	26	22	26
53	Subscribe to two or more magazines	48	67	74	26
68	Friends and family are interested in their reading	35	49	61	26
21	Read stories that were not recognized at first	38	28	13	25
28	Go to public library at least once a month	14	22	39	25